

Swimmer gives us something to cheer

Contributed by Bill Webb
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The news is heavy today with an impending threat to attack Syria for using chemical weapons on its citizenry and word that convicted kidnapper Ariel Castro was discovered dead, hanging from a bed sheet in his prison cell.

But one story is a reminder of the power of the human spirit: Diana Nyad, a 64-year-old, became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida without a shark cage, flippers or a wet suit. The feat took 52 hours, 54 minutes and 18.6 seconds, to be exact, and the swim covered 110.4 statute miles.

The time required for the swim and the distance are astounding, to be sure. Nyad was accompanied by a team that ran alongside in boats, checking on her constantly and making sure she received the food and drink necessary for her body to manage the task.

The endeavor, in excess of four 24/7 days, was sometimes especially grueling, particularly at night, she said. She could have given up at any point and would have been safely plucked from the sea.

However, she didn't stop. This was her fifth attempt at making the swim to Key West, and it fulfilled a 40-year dream of the record-holding swimmer.

There are several things to like about her story. She reminded us that the deep commitment to persevere can pay off in some of the most unlikely situations. Her swim was a perfect example. She never forgot that she accomplished what she did with the help of a team. Achieving the record was in a sense a team effort.

It is no small thing that Nyad refused to give up, not just during the course of a four-day-plus swim but over the course of four decades of pursuing a dream. Few people today have the patience to pursue 40-year dreams. Most of us cannot imagine staying by the stuff and accomplishing an endurance record — finally — at the age of 64.

This is how Nyad described the significance of her feat to CNN:

“The people that follow me aren't sports hounds…. They're human beings who are dealing with their own heartaches, and their own obstacles in life. And they want to know how to get through. And I think I'm a person who represents...You never give up. You find a way if something really is important to your heart, you look and see what's inside yourself, and you find a way.”

To be sure, even surrounded by a team of supporters, this was a dangerous effort for Nyad. But she is right that what she did gives some hope to people facing the toughest issues of life, including heartaches and unchosen obstacles.

Some find themselves fighting for their lives or struggling for the welfare of others, and that takes special and unrelenting commitment to the particular cause.

Nyad isn't hanging up her swimsuit. In fact, she plans to swim for 48 hours in a pool built in New York City Oct. 8-10 to raise funds for those affected by Hurricane Sandy. Then she will use the fundraising event to help victims of the Boston Marathon attack and the Moore, Okla., tornado.

I'm grateful her dream includes benefitting people who need help. We should all wish her continued success.

Bill Webb is editor of Word&Way.